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Mikels, Sarah

From: Mark Siegel <info@thesoftedge.com>
Sent: Friday, December 16, 2011 1:48 PM
To: Mikels, Sarah
Subject: New York Times Article

Click To View Documents: Print - The Pakistanis Have a Point - NYTimes.pdf (7274KB);

Dear Andrew:

Attached please find an article by Bill Keller that will appear in the New York Times Magazine this Sunday, December 18th. The article frames various aspects of the relationship between the United States and Pakistan from the time of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan to the present day and offers a different point of view from that regularly put forth in the mainstream media. Keller describes the relationship as "a case study in unintended consequences" and delves deeply into the reasons for this. As the United States prepares to exit Afghanistan, the United States and Pakistan must work together to rebuild the trust that is necessary to achieve stability and security in the region.

Please feel free to contact us if you have any questions or if we can be of any assistance to you in the future.

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December 14, 2011

The Pakistanis Have a Point

By BILL KELLER

As an American visitor in the power precincts of Pakistan, from the gated enclaves of Islamabad to the manicured lawns of the military garrison in Peshawar, from the luxury fortress of the Serena Hotel to the exclusive apartments of the parliamentary housing blocks, you can expect three time-honored traditions: black tea with milk, obsequious servants and a profound sense of grievance.

Talk to Pakistani politicians, scholars, generals, businessmen, spies and journalists — as I did in October — and before long, you are beyond the realm of politics and diplomacy and into the realm of hurt feelings. Words like “ditch” and “jilt” and “betray” recur. With Americans, they complain, it’s never a commitment, it’s always a transaction. This theme is played to the hilt, for effect, but it is also heartfelt.

“The thing about us,” a Pakistani official told me, “is that we are half emotional and half irrational.”

For a relationship that has oscillated for decades between collaboratively inconvenient time. As America settles onto the long path toward withdrawal from Afghanistan, Pakistan has considerable power to determine whether the end of our longest war is seen as a plausible success or a calamitous failure.

There are, of course, other reasons that Pakistan deserves our attention. It has a fast-growing population approaching 190 million, and it hosts a loose conglomerate of terrorist franchises that offer young Pakistanis employment and purpose unavailable in the suffering feudal economy. It has 100-plus nuclear weapons (Americans who monitor the program don’t know the exact number or the exact location) and a tense, heavily armed border with nuclear India. And its president, Asif Ali Zardari, oversees a ruinous kleptocracy that is spiraling deeper into economic crisis.

But it is the scramble to disengage from Afghanistan that has focused minds in Washington. Pakistan’s rough western frontier with Afghanistan is a sanctuary for militant extremists and

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criminal ventures, including the Afghan Taliban, the Pakistani Taliban, the notorious Haqqani clan and important remnants of the original horror story, Al Qaeda. The mistrust between Islamabad and Kabul is deep, nasty — A

— and tribal. And to complicate matters further, Pakistan is the main military supply route for the American-led international forces and the Afghan National Army.

On Thanksgiving weekend, a month after I returned from Pakistan, the relationship veered precipitously — typically — off course again. NATO aircraft covering an operation by Afghan soldiers and American Special Forces pounded two border posts, inadvertently killing 24 Pakistani soldiers, including two officers. The Americans said that they were fired on first and that Pakistan approved the airstrikes; the Pakistanis say the Americans did not wait for clearance to fire and then bombed the wrong targets.

The fallout was painfully familiar: outrage, suspicion and recrimination, petulance and political posturing. Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, the chief of the army and by all accounts the most powerful man in Pakistan, retaliated by shutting (for now and not for the first time) the NATO supply corridor through his country. The Pakistanis abruptly dropped out of a Bonn conference on the future of Afghanistan and announced they would not cooperate with an American investigation of the airstrikes. President Obama sent condolences but balked at the suggestion of an apology; possibly the president did not want to set off another chorus of Mitt Romney's refrain that Obama is always apologizing for America. At this writing, American officials were trying to gauge whether the errant airstrike would have, as one worried official put it, "a long half-life."

If you survey informed Americans, you will hear Pakistanis described as duplicitous, paranoid, self-pitying and generally infuriating. In turn, Pakistanis describe us as fickle, arrogant, shortsighted and chronically unreliable.

Neither country's caricature of the other is entirely wrong, and it makes for a relationship that is less in need of diplomacy than couples therapy, which customarily starts by trying to see things from the other point of view. While the Pakistanis have hardly been innocent, they have a point when they say America has not been the easiest of partners.

One good place to mark the beginning of this very, very bad year in U.S.-Pakistani relations is Dec. 13, 2010, when Richard C. Holbrooke died of a torn aorta. Holbrooke, the veteran of the Balkan peace, had for two years held the thankless, newly invented role of the administration's special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. The antithesis of mellow, Holbrooke did not hit it off with our no-drama president, and his bluster didn't always play well in Kabul or

Islamabad either.

But Holbrooke paid aggressive attention to Pakistan. While he was characteristically blunt about the divergent U.S. and Pakistani views, he understood that they were a result of different, calculated national interests, not malevolence or mere orneriness. He was convinced that the outlooks could be, if not exactly synchronized, made more compatible. He made a concentrated effort to persuade the Pakistanis that this time the United States would not be a fair-weather friend.

"You need a Holbrooke," says Maleeha Lodhi, a well-connected former ambassador to Washington. "Not necessarily the person but the role." In the absence of full-on engagement, she says, "it's become a very accident-prone relationship."

On Jan. 27, a trigger-happy C.I.A. contractor named Raymond Davis was stuck in Lahore traffic and shot dead two motorcyclists who approached him. A backup vehicle he summoned ran over and killed a bystander. The U.S. spent heavily from its meager stock of good will to persuade the Pakistanis to set Davis free — pleading with a straight face that he was entitled to diplomatic immunity.

On May 2, a U.S. Navy SEALs team caught Osama bin Laden in the military town Abbottabad and killed him. Before long, American officials were quoted questioning whether their Pakistani allies were just incompetent or actually complicit. (The Americans who deal with Pakistan believe that General Kayani and the director of the Inter-Services Intelli-

tory for President Obama was a humiliation for Kayani and Pasha.

In September, members of the Haqqani clan (a criminal syndicate and jihadi cult that's avowedly subservient to the Taliban leader Mullah Omar) marked the 10th anniversary of 9/11 with two theatrical attacks in Afghanistan. First a truck bomb injured 77 American soldiers in Wardak Province. Then militants rained rocket-propelled grenades on the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, forcing our ambassador to spend 20 hours locked down in a bunker.

A few days later the former Afghan president, Burhanuddin Rabbani, spread his arms to welcome an emissary from the Taliban to discuss the possibility of peace talks. As they embraced, the visitor detonated a bomb in his turban, killing himself, R _____ the talks. President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan, without any evidence that American officials are aware of, accused Pakistan of masterminding the grotesque killing in order to scuttle peace talks it couldn't control.

And two days after that, Adm. Mike Mullen, the outgoing chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, took to Capitol Hill to suggest that Pakistani intelligence had blessed the truck bomb and embassy attack.

His testimony came as a particular shock, because if the turbulent affair between the United States and Pakistan had a solid center in recent years, it was the rapport between Mullen and his Pakistani counterpart, General Kayani. Over the four years from Kayani's promotion as chief of the army staff until Mullen's retirement in September, scarcely a month went by when the two didn't meet. Mullen would often drop by Kayani's home at the military enclave in Rawalpindi, arriving for dinner and staying to the early morning, discussing the pressures of command while the sullen-visaged general chain-smoked Dunhills. One time, Kayani took his American friend to the Himalayas for a flyby of the world's second-highest peak, K2. On another occasion, Mullen hosted Kayani on the golf course at the Naval Academy. The two men seemed to have developed a genuine trust and respect for each other.

But Mullen's faith in an underlying common purpose was rattled by the truck bombing and the embassy attack, both of which opened Mullen to the charge that his courtship of Kayani had been a failure. So — over the objection of the State Department — the admiral set out to demonstrate that he had no illusions.

The Haqqani network "acts as a veritable arm of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency," he declared. "With ISI support, Haqqani operatives planned and conducted that truck-bomb attack as well as the assault on our embassy."

Several officials with access to the intelli

len's denunciation led to a ripple of alarm that U.S. military "hardliners" were contemplating an invasion. The press had hysterics. Kayani made a show of putting the Pakistani Army on alert. The Pakistani rupee fell in value.

In Washington, Mullen's remarks captured — and fed — a vengeful mood and a rising sense of fatalism about Pakistan. Bruce O. Riedel, an influential former C.I.A. officer who led a 2009 policy review for President Obama on Pakistan and Afghanistan, captured the prevailing sentiment in an Op-Ed in The Times, in which he called for a new policy of "containment," meaning "a more hostile relationship" toward the army and intelli

ld me. "And I can see how this gets catastrophically

worse. . . . I don't see how it gets a whole lot better."

When Gen. David H. Petraeus took over the U.S. military's Central Command in 2008, he commissioned expert briefing papers on his new domain, which sprawled from Egypt, across the Persian Gulf, to Central Asia. The paper on Afghanistan and Pakistan began, according to an American who has read it, roughly this way: "The United States has no vital national interests in Afghanistan. Our vital national interests are in Pakistan," notably the security of those nuclear weapons and the infiltration by Al Qaeda. The paper then went on for the remaining pages to discuss Afghanistan. Pakistan hardly got a mention. "That's typical," my source said. Pakistan tends to be an afterthought.

The Pakistani version of modern history is one of American betrayal, going back at least to the Kennedy administration's arming of Pakistan's archrival, India, in the wake of its 1962 border war with China.

The most consequential feat of American opportunism came when we enlisted Pakistan to bedevil the Soviet occupiers of Afghanistan in the 1980s. The intelligence agencies of the U.S. and Pakistan — with help from Saudi Arabia — created the perfect thorn in the Soviet underbelly: young Muslim "freedom fighters," schooled in jihad at Pakistani madrassas, laden with American surface-to-air missiles and led by charismatic warriors who set aside tribal rivalries to war against foreign occupation.

After the Soviets admitted defeat in 1989, the U.S. — mission accomplished! — pulled out, leaving Pakistan holding the bag: several million refugees, an Afghanistan torn by civil war and a population of jihadists who would find new targets for their American-supplied arms. In the ensuing struggle for control of Afghanistan, Pakistan eventually sided with the Taliban, who were dominated by the Pashtun tribe that populates the Pakistan-Afghanistan frontier. The rival Northern Alliance was run by Tajiks and Uzbeks and backed by India; and the one thing you can never underestimate is Pakistan's obsession with bigger, richer, better-armed India.

As long as Pakistan was our partner in tormenting the Soviet Union, the U.S. winked at Pakistan's nuclear-weapons program. After all, India was developing a nuclear arsenal, and it was inevitable that Pakistan would follow suit. But after the Soviets retreated, Pakistan was ostracized under a Congressional antiproliferation measure called the Pressler Amendment, stripped of military aid (some of it budgeted to bring Pakistani officers to the U.S. for exposure to American military values and discipline) and civilian assistance (most of it used to promote civil society and buy good will).

Our relationship with Pakistan sometimes seems like a case study in unintended consequences. The spawning of the mujahadeen is, of course, E

And Exhibit C might be America's protectionist tariffs on Pakistan's most important export, textiles. For years, experts, including a series of American ambassadors in Islamabad, have said that the single best thing the U.S. could do to pull Pakistan into the modern world is to ease trade barriers, as it has done with many other countries. Instead of sending foreign aid and hoping it trickles down, we could make it easier for Americans to buy Pakistani shirts, towels and denims, thus lifting an industry that is an incubator of the middle class and employs many women. Congress, answerable to domestic textile interests, has had none of it.

"Pakistan the afterthought" was the theme very late one night when I visited the home of Pakistan's finance minister, Abdul Hafeez Shaikh. After showing me his impressive art collection, Shaikh flopped on a sofa and ran through the roll call of American infidelity. He worked his way, decade by decade, to the war on terror. Now, he said, Pakistan is tasked by the Americans with simultaneously helping to kill terrorists and — the newest twist — using its influence to bring them to the bargaining table. Congress, meanwhile, angry about terrorist sanctuaries, is squeezing off much of the financial aid that is supposed to be the lubricant in our alliance.

"Pakistan was the cold-war friend, the Soviet-A -war friend, the terror-war friend," the minister said. "As soon as the wars ended, so did the assistance. The sense of being discarded is so recent."

A Boston University-educated economist who made his money in private equity investing — in other words, a cosmopolitan man — Shaikh seemed slightly abashed by his own bitterness.

"I'm not saying that this style of Pakistani thinking is analytically correct," he said. "I'm just telling you how people feel."

He waved an arm toward his dining room, where he hung a Warhol of Muhammad Ali. "We're just supposed to be like Ali — take the beating for seven rounds from Foreman," he said. "But this time the Pakistanis have wised up. We are playing the game, but we know you can't take these people at their word."

With a timetable that has the United States out of Afghanistan, or mostly out, by the end of 2014, Pakistan has leverage it did not have when the war began.

One day after 9/11, Richard Armitage, the deputy secretary of state, summoned the head of Pakistani intelligence for a talking to. "We are asking all of our friends: Do they stand with us or against us?" he said. The following day, Armitage handed over a list of seven demands, w
topping Al Qaeda operations on the Pakistani border, giving American invaders access to Pakistani bases and airspace and breaking all ties with the Taliban regime.

The Pakistanis believed from the beginning that Afghanistan had “American quagmire” written all over it. Moreover, what America had in mind for Afghanistan was antithetical to Pakistan’s self-interest.

“The only time period between 1947 and the American invasion of Afghanistan that Pakistanis have felt secure about Afghanistan is during the Taliban period,” from 1996 to 2001, says Vali Nasr, an American scholar of the region who is listened to in both academia and government. Now the Bush administration would attempt to supplant the Taliban with a strong independent government in Kabul and a muscular military. “Everything about this vision is dangerous to Pakistan,” Nasr says.

Pakistan’s military ruler at the time, Pervez Musharraf, saw the folly of defying an American ultimatum. He quickly agreed to the American demands and delivered on many of them. In practice, though, the accommodation with the Taliban was never fully curtailed. Pakistan knew America’s mission in Afghanistan would end, and it spread its bets.

The Bush-Musharraf relationship, Vali Nasr says, “Hollywood suspension of disbelief. Musharraf was a convenient person who created a myth that we subscribed to — basically that Pakistan was on the same page with us, it was an ally in the war on terror and it subscribed to our agenda for Afghanistan.”

But the longer the war in Afghanistan dragged on, the harder it was to sustain the illusion.

In October, I took the highway west from Islamabad to Peshawar, headquarters of the Pakistan Army corps responsible for the frontier with Afghanistan. Over tea and cookies, Lt. Gen. Asif Yasin Malik, the three-star who commanded the frontier (he retired this month) talked about how the Afghan war looked from his side of the border.

The official American version of the current situation in Afghanistan goes like this: By applying the counterinsurgency strategy that worked in Iraq and relying on a surge of troops and the increasingly sophisticated use of drones, the United States has been beating the insurgency into submission, while at the same time standing up an indigenous Afghan Army that could take over the mission. If only Pakistan would police its side of the border — we’d be on track for an exit in 2014.

The Pakistanis have a different narrative. First, a central government has never successfully ruled Afghanistan. Second, King Abdullah — a reputation that has not been dispelled by his recent, manic declarations of brotherhood. And third, they believe that despite substantial investment by the United States, the Afghan Army and the police are a long way from being ready to hold the country. In other words, America is preparing to leave behind an

Afghanistan that looks like incipient chaos to Pakistan.

In Peshawar, General Malik talked with polite disdain about his neighbor to the west. His biggest fear — one I'm told Kayani stresses in every meeting with his American counterparts — is the capability of the Afghan National Security Forces, an army of 170,000 and another 135,000 police, responsible for preventing Afghanistan from disintegrating back into failed-state status. If the U.S. succeeds in creating such a potent fighting force, that makes Pakistanis nervous, because they see it (rightly) as potentially unfriendly and (probably wrongly) as a potential agent of Indian influence. The more likely and equally unsettling outcome, Pakistanis believe, is that the Afghan military — immature, fractious and dependent on the U.S. Treasury — will disintegrate into heavily armed tribal cliques and bandit syndicates. And America, as always, will be gone when hell breaks loose.

General Malik studied on an exchange at Fort McNair, in Washington, D.C., and has visited 23 American states. He likes to think he is not clueless about how things work in our country.

"Come 2015, which senator would be ready to vote \$9 billion, or \$7 billion, to be spent on this army?" he asked. "Even \$5 billion a year. O.K., maybe one year, maybe two years. But with the economy going downhill, how does the future afford this? Very challenging."

American officials will tell you, not for attribution, that Malik's concerns are quite reasonable.

So I asked the general if that was why his forces have not been more aggressive about mopping up terrorist sanctuaries along the border. Still hedging their bets? His answer was elaborate and not entirely facile.

First of all, the general pointed out that Pakistan has done some serious fighting in terrorist strongholds and shed a lot of blood. Over the past two years, Malik's forces have been enlarged to 147,000 soldiers, mainly by relocating more than 50,000 from the Indian border. They have largely controlled militant activities in the Swat Valley, for example, w

— a mountainous region of terrorist Deadwoods populated by battle-toughened outlaws.

Yes, Malik said, North Waziristan is a terrible situation, but his forces are responsible for roughly 1,500 miles of border, they police an archipelago of rough towns in the so-called Federally Administered Tribal Areas, or FATA, and by the way, they had a devastating flood to handle last year.

"If you are not able to close the Mexican border, when you have the technology at your call,

w ,” he said, “how can you expect us to close our border, especially if you are not locking the doors on your side?”

Americans who know the area well concede that, for all our complaints, Pakistan doesn’t push harder in large part because it can’t. The Pakistan Army has been trained to patrol the Indian border, not to battle hardened insurgents. They have comparatively crude weaponry. When they go up against a ruthless outfit like the Haqqanis, they tend to get killed. R ,000 Pakistani troops have died in these border wars — more than the number of all the allied soldiers killed in Afghanistan.

“They’re obviously reluctant to go against the Haqqanis, but reluctant for a couple of reasons,” an American official told me. “Not just the reason that they see them as a potential proxy force if Afghanistan doesn’t go well, but also because they just literally lack the capability to take them on. They’ve got enough wars on their hands. They’ve not been able to consolidate their gains up in the northern part of the FATA, they have continued problems in other areas and they just can’t deal with another campaign, w .”

And there is another, fundamental problem, Malik said. There is simply no popular support for stepping up the fight in what is seen as America’s war. Ordinary Pakistanis feel they have paid a high price in collateral damage, between the civilian casualties from unmanned drone attacks and the blowback from terror groups within Pakistan.

“When you go into North Waziristan and carry out some major operation, there is going to be a terrorist backlash in the rest of the country,” Malik told me. “The political mood, or the public mood, is ‘no more operations.’ ”

In late October, Hillary Clinton arrived in Islamabad, leading a delegation that included Petraeus, recently confirmed as C.I.A. director, and Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, Mullen’s successor as chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Petraeus used to refer to Holbrooke as “my diplomatic wingman,” a bit of condescension he apparently intended as a tribute. This time, the security contingent served as diplomacy’s wingmen.

The trip was intended as a show of unity and resolve by an administration that has spoken with conflicting voices when it has focused on Pakistan at all. For more than four hours, the Americans and a potent lineup of Pakistani counterparts talked over a dinner table.

Perhaps the most revealing thing about the dinner was the guest list. The nine participants included Kayani and Pasha, but not President Zardari or Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani, w . The only representative of the civilian government was Clinton’s counterpart, the new foreign minister,

H , a 34-year-o -haired beauty of a Bollywood leading lady, a degree in hospitality management from the University of Massachusetts and, most important, close ties to the Pakistani military.

For a country that cherishes civilian democracy, we have a surprising affinity for strong men in uniform. Based on my conversations with American officials across the government, the U.S. has developed a grudging respect for Kayani, whom they regard as astute, straightforward, respectful of the idea of democratic government but genuinely disgusted by the current regime's thievery and ineptitude. (We know from the secret diplomatic cables disclosed by WikiLeaks that Kayani has confided to American officials his utter contempt for his president and "hinted that he might, however reluctantly, have to persuade President Zardari to resign.")

Zardari, w laim to office is that he is the widower of the assassinated and virtually canonized Benazir Bhutto, has been mainly preoccupied with building up his patronage machine for elections in 2013. The Americans expect little from him and don't see a likely savior among his would-be political challengers. (As this article goes to press, Zardari is recovering from chest pains in a hospital in Dubai; there are rumors he won't return.) So, Kayani it is. The official American consensus is less enamored of Kayani's loyal intelligence underling, General Pasha, w

, but Pasha is too powerful to ignore.

The day after the marathon dinner, Clinton's entourage took over the Serena Hotel for a festival of public diplomacy — a press conference with the foreign minister, followed by a town meeting with young Pakistanis and then a hardball round-table interview with a circle of top editors and anchors.

C 's visit was generally portrayed, not least in the Pakistani press, as a familiar ritual of America talking tough to Pakistan. In the town meeting, a woman asked why America always played the role of bossy mother-in-law, and that theme delighted editorial cartoonists for days.

But the private message to the Pakistanis — and a more careful reading of Clinton's public performance — reflected a serious effort to reboot a troubled relationship. C

— in addition to the military, an estimated 30,000 civilian dead, the equivalent of a 9/11 every year. She ruled out sending American ground troops into Pakistani territory. She endorsed a Pakistani plea that U.S. forces in Afghanistan do a better job of cleaning up militant sanctuaries on their own side of the border.

Questioned by a prominent television anchor, she repudiated Mullen's testimony, not only disavowing any evidence of ISI complicity in the attack on America's embassy in Kabul but also

soft-peddling the spy agency's coziness with terrorists.

"Now, every intelligence agency has contacts with unsavory characters," she said. "I don't think you would get any denial from either the ISI or the C.I.A. that people in their respective organizations have contacts with members of groups that have different agendas than the governments'. But that doesn't mean that they are being directed or being approved or otherwise given a seal of approval."

That particular riff may have caused jaws to clench at the C.I.A. compound in Langley, Va. The truth is, according to half a dozen senior officials with access to the intelligence, the evidence of Pakistan's affinity for terrorists is often circumstantial and ambiguous, a matter of intercepted conversations in coded language, and their dealings are thought to be more pragmatic than ideological, more a matter of tolerating than directing, but the relationship goes way beyond "contacts with unsavory characters."

"They're facilitating," one official told me. "They provide information to the Haqqanis, they let them cross back and forth across the border, they let this L.E.T. guy (the leader of the dangerous Lashkar-e-Taiba faction of Kashmiri terrorists) be in prison and not be in prison at the same time."

And yet the Pakistanis have been helpful — Abbottabad aside — against Al Qaeda, which is America's first priority and which the Pakistanis recognize as a menace to everyone. They have shared intelligence, provided access to interrogations and coordinated operations. Before the fatal border mishap Thanksgiving weekend, one U.S. official told me, anti-terror cooperation between the C.I.A. and Pakistani intelligence had been "very much on the upswing."

The most striking aspect of Clinton's trip, however, was her enthusiastic embrace of what is now called "reconciliation" — w

. That would also mean Afghanistan could get by with a smaller, cheaper army. The notion has been anathema to the Americans tasked with killing Taliban; a principled stand against negotiating with terrorists is also a political meme that acquires particular potency in election seasons, as viewers of the Republican debates can attest.

Almost unnoticed, though, reconciliation has moved to a central place in America's strategy and has become the principal assignment for U.S. officials in the region. Clinton first signaled this in a speech to the Asia Society last February, w

, isolating the terrorists at war with America, meaning Al Qaeda.

The speech was buried beneath other news at the time, but in early October, Tom Donilon, Obama's national security adviser, met Kayani in Abu Dhabi to stress to skeptical Pakistani leaders that she was serious. Clinton's visit to Islamabad with her generals in tow was designed to put the full weight of the U.S. behind it.

Clinton publicly acknowledged that the ISI (in fact, it was General Pasha in person) had already brokered a preliminary meeting between a top American diplomat and a member of the Haqqani clan. Nothing much came of the meeting, news of which promptly leaked, but Clinton said America was willing to sit down with the Taliban. She said that what had once been preconditions for negotiations — renouncing violence, shunning Al Qaeda and accepting Afghanistan's constitution, including freedoms for women — were now "goals."

In diplomacy, no process is fully initiated until it has been named. A meeting of Pakistani political parties in Islamabad had adopted a rubric for peace talks with the Taliban, a slogan the Pakistanis repeated at every opportunity: "Give peace a chance." If having this project boiled down to a John Lennon lyric diminished the gravitas of the occasion, Clinton didn't let on.

Within the American policy conglomerate, not everyone is terribly upbeat about the prospect of reconciling with the Taliban. The Taliban have so far publicly rejected talks, and the turban-bomb killing of Rabbani was a serious reversal. There is still some suspicion — encouraged by Afghanistan and India — a

, believing the Pashtun

Islamists would be more susceptible to Pakistani influence. A more cynical theory, which I heard quite a bit in New Delhi, is that the Pakistani Army actually wants chaos on its various borders to justify its large payroll. Most Americans I met who are immersed in this problem put little stock in either of those notions. The Pakistanis may not be the most trustworthy partners in Asia, but they aren't idiots. They know, at least at the senior levels, that a resurgent Taliban means not just perpetual mayhem on the border but also an emboldening of indigenous jihadists whose aim is nothing less than a takeover of nuclear Pakistan. But agreeing on the principle of a "stable Afghanistan" is easier than defining it, or getting there.

After Clinton left Islamabad, a senior Pakistani intelligence official I wanted to meet arrived for breakfast with me and a colleague at Islamabad's finest hotel. With a genial air of command, he ordered eggs Benedict for the table, declined my request to turn on a tape recorder, ("Just keep my name out of it," he instructed later) and settled into an hour of polished spin.

"The Taliban learned its lesson in the madrassas and applied them ruthlessly," he said, as the Hollandaise congealed. "Now the older ones have seen 10 years of war, and reconciliation is possible. Their outlook has been tempered by reason and contact with the modern world. They

have relatives and friends in Kabul. They have money from the opium trade. They watch satellite TV. They are on the Internet."

On the other hand, he continued, "if you kill off the midtier Taliban, the ones who are going to replace them — and there are many waiting in line, sadly — are younger, more aggressive and eager to prove themselves."

So what would it take to bring the Taliban into a settlement? First, he said, stop killing them. Second, an end to foreign military presence, the one thing that always mobilizes the occupied in that part of the world. Third, an Afghan constitution framed to give more local autonomy, so that Pashtun regions could be run by Pashtuns.

On the face of it, as my breakfast companion surely knows, those sound like three nonstarters, and taken together they sound rather like surrender. Even Clinton is not calling for a break in hostilities, which the Americans see as the way to drive the Taliban to the bargaining table. As for foreign presence, both the Americans and the Afghans expect some long-term residual force to stay in Afghanistan, to backstop the Afghan Army and carry out drone attacks against Al Qaeda. And while it is not hard to imagine a decentralized Afghanistan — in which Islamic traditionalists hold sway in the rural areas but cede the urban areas, where modern notions like educating girls have already made considerable headway — that would be hard for Americans to swallow.

Clinton herself sounded pretty categorical on that last point when she told Pakistani interviewers: "I cannot in good faith participate in any process that I think would lead the women of Afghanistan back to the dark ages. I will not participate in that."

To questions of how these seemingly insurmountable differences might be surmounted, Marc Grossman, w , replies simply: "I don't know whether these people are reconcilable or not. But the job we've been given is to find out."

If you look at reconciliation as a route to peace, it requires a huge leap of faith. Surely the Taliban have marked our withdrawal date on their calendars. The idea that they are so deeply weary of war — let alone watching YouTube and yearning to join the world they see on their laptops — feels like wishful thinking.

But if you look at reconciliation as a step in couples therapy — a shared project in managing a highly problematic, ultimately critical relationship — it makes more sense. It gives Pakistan something it craves: a seat at the table where the future of Afghanistan is plotted. It gets Pakistan and Afghanistan talking to each other. It offers a supporting role to other players in the region — notably Turkey, which has taken on a more active part as an Islamic peace broker.

It could drain some of the acrimony and paranoia from the U.S.-Pakistan rhetoric.

It might not save Afghanistan, but it could be a helpful start to saving Pakistan.

What Clinton and company are seeking is a course of patient commitment that America, frankly, is not usually so good at. The relationship has given off some glimmers of hope — with U.S. encouragement, Pakistan and India have agreed to normalize trade relations; the ISI has given American interrogators access to Osama bin Laden's wives — but the funerals of those Pakistani troops last month remind us that the country is still a graveyard of optimism.

At least the U.S. seems, for now, to be paying attention to the right problem.

"If you stand back," said one American who is in the thick of the American strategy-making, "and say, by the year 2020, you've got two countries — 30 million people in this country, 200 million people with nuclear weapons in this country, American troops in neither. Which matters? It's not Afghanistan."

Bill Keller, a former executive editor of The Times, writes a column for the Op-Ed page.

Editor: Greg Veis

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